

FACTSHEET

Veterinary Services

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

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Smuggled Birds A Threat to America's Caged Bird and Poultry Industries

Every year, around 25,000 birds are smuggled into the United States. Most of them are brought in during the hatching season for wild birds, from the beginning of January through mid-May. Most of the birds originate from Central America, South America, and Mexico. Smuggled birds that don't die from illness or stress are often disease carriers.

Most of these birds are the popular hookbilled variety that have been called timebombs of disease—and rightly so! While many show no symptoms, they often carry the contagious virus that causes exotic Newcastle disease. U.S. poultry and caged birds are extremely vulnerable to this virus; if contracted by just one bird, the disease spreads rapidly to others, then from location to location. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) regulates the importation of birds to keep this costly disease out of the United States.

Pet Bird Popularity in the United States

Experts believe that 15 percent of U.S. households now include pet birds. In 1974, about 28,000 birds entered the country in legal commercial shipments; by fiscal year 1984, that number had risen to almost 742,000. For each of the past 3 years, about 140,000 birds were imported.

Rules for Importing Birds

In response to outbreaks of exotic Newcastle disease in the United States, APHIS developed strict regulations for importing birds. Travelers entering the country with birds must leave them in quarantine for 30 days at an APHIS import facility. Owners must reserve space ahead of time and pay the full quarantine fee no later than the date of arrival. They must also obtain a health certificate for the bird in the nation of its origin and arrange for shipping the bird to

its final destination after its release from quarantine. Copies of the regulations for importing pet birds can be obtained from APHIS.

Exotic Newcastle Disease

Velogenic viscerotropic and velogenic neurotropic (or exotic) Newcastle disease—virulent forms of the milder Newcastle disease—can affect virtually all species of birds and are especially dangerous to young birds and birds kept in confinement. Some birds may carry the causative virus and spread it to others but never become ill themselves. Sick birds may die before any obvious symptoms of the disease appear. Birds with exotic Newcastle disease may act listless and breathe heavily, become progressively weaker, and suffer internal bleeding and severe diarrhea. Epidemics in poultry flocks can kill up to 95 percent of the birds. The disease is not a health hazard to people eating poultry or eggs, but it can cause transitory eye inflammations to those who handle infected birds.

U.S. Outbreaks and the Smuggled Bird Connection

A major epidemic of exotic Newcastle disease in southern California from 1971 to 1974 resulted in the destruction of 12 million birds, mostly laying hens. Since then, there have been outbreaks of the disease in pet birds, but because of action by State and Federal eradication teams, exotic Newcastle disease virus has not reached commercial poultry flocks. USDA epidemiologists studying the disease have traced these outbreaks directly to smuggled birds. Thanks to cooperation and continued vigilance by bird owners and dealers and Federal and State agencies, the United States has experienced only two smuggled-bird-related outbreaks of the virulent forms of Newcastle disease in the 1990's.

Economic Costs: Not Chickenfeed

The outbreak of exotic Newcastle disease in southern California cost U.S. taxpayers \$56 million to eradicate. Since then, APHIS has spent an average of \$1 million a year to stop outbreaks resulting from smuggled birds. The money covers indemnities for

destroyed birds, salaries for members of eradication teams, and the purchase of equipment and supplies.

If exotic Newcastle disease became established in America, it could cost the poultry industry over \$230 million a year, increasing the cost of eggs and poultry to consumers. In 1987, infected birds from wholesalers in 2 States spread exotic Newcastle disease virus to 10 States. Total eradication costs came to \$274,843.

Exotic Bird Bargains? Not Likely!

If you are offered an exotic bird deal too good to believe, don't take it. That bird was probably smuggled into the country and is very likely to be diseased. A low price won't compensate for the financial loss to poultry flock owners and increased consumer costs for poultry and egg products if the smuggled bird starts an epidemic.

Birds native to other lands but raised in the United States are produced here in small numbers. Because it is expensive and time consuming to raise them and because demand exceeds supply, owners don't offer domestically raised exotic birds at lower-than-average prices.

Punishment for Smugglers

Bird smugglers can be sentenced up to 5 years in prison and fined up to \$20,000 per violation if convicted under a law administered by the U.S. Department of Interior's (USDI) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

How To Help

Deal only with reputable pet shops or wholesale dealers—companies that have been recommended or that have been in business for a number of years. If you respond to a classified advertisement for a bird, make sure it is being offered by a bona fide dealer or breeder.

Be suspicious if the price of a bird is lower than normal, and be wary of any advertised at rock-bottom prices. (See hotline note below.)

Make certain to check for the circular stainless-steel, USDA-approved leg band—always engraved with three letters and three numbers—before buying an imported hookbilled bird. This band is your assurance of a legally imported bird.

Isolate newly purchased birds from others you own for at least 30 days. If any of your birds seem uncoordinated or have trouble breathing, contact local veterinarians or animal health officials immediately. If birds die, place them in plastic bags and refrigerate them so they may be submitted to a diagnostic laboratory. Your local veterinarian or State or Federal animal health official will arrange for any necessary testing.

If you suspect illegal activity, call APHIS' Emergency Programs at (301) 734-8073.

Bird dealers should maintain a good working relationship with a veterinarian who specializes in poultry diseases.

If you're planning to buy a bird overseas, learn about the strict regulations for bringing it into the United States. Obtain a free copy of the pamphlet "Importing a Pet Bird" by writing:

Pet Bird Pamphlet

USDA, APHIS

4700 River Road, Unit 1

Riverdale, MD 20737-1229

Support this education effort! If you belong to a bird club or industry group, copy this factsheet and distribute it to members.

Information Contacts

Federal Government:

USDA Smuggled Bird Hotline (301) 734-8073

USDI Fish and Wildlife Service (703) 358-2104

Bird Industry:

Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (202) 452-1525

Bird Hobbyists:

American Federation of Aviculture (602) 484-0931